

The Green New Deal in the Adirondacks: Imagining a Green Future in Rural America

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Adirondacks - Environmental Planning

Environmental politics in the Adirondacks is defined by its land use history. Land classification in the Adirondacks is a product of changing economies, perceived values of nature, and state intervention. Resource extraction was prominent in the region in the 19th century and land was integral to this operation. In this process, land became a commodity to be sold, owned, and used. The Adirondacks additionally became a place of economic importance as it provides water for the Hudson River and the Erie Canal. Recognizing this increase in public use and importance, the state of New York began maintaining and buying land in 1883; in 1885 this state owned land became classified as the Forest Preserve.

As the state intervened in land use and classification, boundaries were created and certain activities were prohibited or promoted. The resulting implemented policies and regulations included the creation of the Adirondack Park—including both private and state owned land—in 1892. The recognition of the importance of Adirondack resources, specifically water, and the history of exploitative logging and extraction practices resulted in the establishment of the park. This establishment of legal boundaries of the park was important to the welfare of NYS, as it protected the head waters of lakes flowing south as well as the recreational spaces used for hunting, fishing and hiking.

At the conception of the Park and Forest Preserve, the Adirondacks land was primarily understood for its commodity value, such as the economic importance of wetlands. The transformation of the region as a commodity to a resource introduced environmental concerns into zoning. Strict zoning laws thus developed as a solution for land use control. The Adirondacks, in political terms, is known for its establishment of the Forest Preserve (controlling land protection) and regional zoning (controlling land use and intensity). Conflict in the area has been maintained through these political terms as the dichotomy of conservation/development and people/nature continues to be reinforced by local environmental politics.

Adirondack Park Agency

The Adirondack Park Agency (APA) is a New York State government agency created in 1971 and dedicated to creating public and private land use plans in the Adirondack Park. The APA is unique in its position as a regional body with private and public land regulatory powers typically granted to the state at large. This form of state intervention on a local scale initially involved no local control, and thus received much criticism from both local communities and other state agencies. Vocal criticism of the agency has existed since the APA Act in 1971, in addition to public attacks such as attempted arson of the agency headquarters and deliveries of manure, though few amendments have been made to the act.

The state came to an understanding that regional conservation would not be achieved without a division in private and public land. When the APA’s State Land Master Plan was created in 1972, it gave “wilderness” a legal, bureaucratic definition. The political transformation of the Adirondack Park produced a shift in public understanding of the region as it emphasized the divide in public and private land. The transformation, and reception to such transformation, in the lines and borders of the park emphasize that land has different meanings to different people. The regional planning and zoning that New York State introduced was an experiment in conservation and sustainable development, though locals associated these regulations as infringing on the towns’ right to control their land and economy. The controversial existence of the APA, the Adirondack Park, and the Forest Preserve demonstrate the ongoing challenge of protecting wilderness, resources, and communities in the Adirondacks. Studying the history of environmental politics in the Adirondacks through an analysis of the APA can provide insight into how environmental politics is received, promoted, and understood.

The New Deal policies that found success in their unity of labor and conservation gradually developed concerted backlash, largely based on distrust of federal agency regulation in the name of public interest environmentalism. These concerns over New Deal policies flowed over into the establishment of the APA where the agency fostered a separation of the tie between conservation and development in favor of environmental planning. This disconnection of conservation and development resulted in conflict between the state agency, local government, local communities, and state power.

Overview of Thesis

This thesis uses the legacy of the New Deal to think about how a Green New Deal might impact a place like the Adirondacks. It does so by looking at the history of political consciousness in the region through a combination of archival and ethnographic methodologies. Specifically, the thesis reconstructs the tensions that have pitted local residents and environmental activism against one another in struggles to determine the future of the Adirondack Park

Chapter 1 provides the base to explore the environmental tensions in the Adirondack Park. Through a discussion of the historical transformation of environmentalism in this country, this section reveals the changing nature of environmental politics. There is an introduction to environmental politics on a national and local scale and discussion of the resulting form of environmental planning that exists in the Adirondacks. To conclude, the foundation of the Green New Deal is laid out and the thesis focus is defined. This focus is determining how a Green New Deal might impact a place like the Adirondacks.

Chapter 2 is a review of the literature in environmental anthropology along with a discussion of rural environmentalism.

Chapter 3 lays out the historical basis of the thesis. This chapter describes the emergence of the New Deal and the form of active politics that it introduces. The failures and successes of the Civilian Conservation Corps, a New Deal relief program focused on mobilizing a base of laborers for conservation-based work, is then described in detail. This includes discussion of the legacy of the Civilian Conservation Corps camps in the Adirondack region. The chapter includes an exploration of the resistance and concerns that emerged in the New Deal era, laying the foundation for further discussion of environmental politics in the Adirondacks.

Chapter 4 expands on the form of politics that existed post-New Deal and reveals how the concerns over New Deal policies further escalated in the period of the establishment of the Adirondack Park Agency. The conservation approaches that defined the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Adirondack Park Agency are contrasted to reveal how disparate forms of environmental planning have been received in the Adirondacks. Backlash to the park agency and the management of this resistance is additionally reviewed.

Chapter 5 focuses on the political consciousness around the environment in the Adirondack region along with bridgework in environmental politics. I explore current local conflicts of environmental and political nature and identify possible barriers to acceptance of a Green New Deal in the region. Using discourse on futurity, I imagine what a Green New Deal would look like in the Adirondacks and how this vision can be tweaked to be most effective.

1885	The State Forest Preserve (state-owned land) is created
1892	The Adirondack Park is created
1894	The “forever wild” concept becomes a clause in the NYS Constitution - state-owned land will forever be wild forest land
1971	The Adirondack Park Agency Act becomes law after Governor Nelson Rockefeller’s Temporary Study Commission on the Future of the Adirondacks (TSC)
1972	The Adirondack Park state land master plan (SLMP) becomes law
1973	The Adirondack Park private land use and development plan becomes law

New Deal

Implemented under Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) as a result of the Great Depression, the New Deal introduced programs and regulations to bring relief to the poor, recover the economy, and reform the financial system. Under the New Deal, political power was used to take responsibility for individual and national economic well being. These programs, policies, and regulations do so in part by mobilizing a base of laborers—specifically within the urban electorate. With programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps, this is done through work with an objective: conservation. This form of active politics culminates in a lasting bureaucratic model that is maintained to manage the progress made under the New Deal. The CCC introduced a revolutionary articulation of labor and preservation that has since been broken. While the managerial apparatus to maintain progress remains, there is a disconnect between labor and conservation. The interests of the poor are no longer a part of this apparatus as there has been a shift in environmental policy and labor in United States politics. Since the disarticulation of labor and conservation progressed, political projects such as the Green New Deal have been proposed to address this.

Green New Deal

House Resolution 109, legislation presented by New York Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Massachusetts Senator Ed Markey, proposes for the creation of a Green New Deal. Similar to FDR’s New Deal, the Green New Deal proposes a new sociopolitical framework that places responsibility for economic transformation on the federal government. This transformation will include a shift towards renewables and sustainable industry and manufacturing. In addition to economic transformation, the resolution acknowledges the social and political change that must occur in order to alleviate the effects of climate change and prevent future ecological degradation. The Green New Deal proposes transformative change that includes large and long-term solutions to the large and long-term problems that accompany climate change and the current socio-economic crises in America. The outlined plan of mobilization to include historically unaddressed groups in America in conversations of social, economic, and climate crises allows this legislation to develop its convergent power.

Civilian Conservation Corps

A nine year (1933-1942) public works program under Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) provided work for young men and veterans in response to the Great Depression. This work had a unique focus: environmental conservation. In addition to reforestation and infrastructure and park construction, natural resource extraction, specifically from rural areas, was a significant aspect of this work. Despite initial concern for worker competency and lack of resources, the camps were an ecological, economic, and social success in New York State (NYS); there were 26 camps in the Adirondacks alone.

The CCC is an example of the federal government exercising its power when local and state efforts were insufficient. The New Deal era policies involved targeting industries in need of support and addressing unemployment at a federal level. Efforts to increase employment through public works had largely focused on urban areas, though the introduction of the CCC allowed for conservation and unemployment to be addressed in rural areas.

Jobs in the Adirondack CCC camps included trail building, road and dam construction, fire tower construction and maintenance, fire fighting, planting trees, and restoration following extensive logging and forest fires. These manual labor jobs involving the physical landscape played a role in developing social identity—mainly with regards to rural and community identity. The CCC is an example of federal and state managed conservation work—labor intensive projects that helped local communities with services such as firefighting and protected the Adirondack Park through reforestation—that contributed to the Adirondacks that people know today; a divided land with both nature and tourism. Alongside ecological conservation came the construction of infrastructure and campsites that enabled the Adirondacks to become more accessible for recreation. While the CCC in the Adirondacks did not solve broad economic struggles, the lasting legacy it had in individual enrollees and on the land suggests that this model—a connection between land, preservation, and labor that is maintained through local control—could be implemented, rather than the bureaucratic model that has developed.

Environmental Politics

Local critiques of environmentalism in the Adirondacks lie not in policy, but in politics. The top-down regulation system of environmental planning and protection in this space is enforced by the Adirondack Park Agency (APA). The APA, created to balance use, development, and preservation, was established as the management of the Adirondack Park shifted from a focus on forest protection (due to its status as a source of water and timber) to a protected area also used for recreation and public use. This form of state intervention on a local scale involved no local control and developed state-wide and higher level government support, though has a more complex relationship with the communities that must live by its guidelines.

The establishment of the APA represents a case of local versus outsider politics and regulation. Adirondack communities did not want to lose local control, and they did not want to be viewed as incapable of governing themselves and the space they felt a sense of belonging to. The establishment of this state agency, in many Adirondack residents’ eyes, represented action by NYS that ignored their local knowledge and prevented them from having a voice in decisions over land and resource use.

This opposition to environmental planning is not anti-environmentalism, but rather anti-outside regulation. These sentiments are shared nationally, with communities being labeled as anti-environment because they have historically opposed environmentalist regulation. This common prejudice ignores the larger basis of resistance. These marginal narratives cannot be excluded from environmentalist discourse.

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